

COSMOPOLITAN CHRONICLE

True tales from the annals of history, archaeology, construction, and restoration of the Casa de Bandini and Cosmopolitan Hotel.
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THE CHALLENGE OF HISTORIC PRESERVATION

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Restoring the Casa de Bandini, a building with a long and storied past that underwent major rehabilitations, to its appearance as the Cosmopolitan Hotel poses some real challenges. Oftentimes, there is no perfect decision about how best to preserve, retain, or restore historic fabric.

Let's take an example. Over the last year, State Park's staff and consultants have removed sections of the exterior stucco on the first floor. They have discovered two layers of stucco. The most recent layer is made of Portland cement. About a quarter-inch deep and painted off-white, it was applied in the early 1950s when Frank Cardwell owned the building. Beneath it is another layer of cement stucco finished in a fine, hard, buff color, which was put on in 1930 by Cave Coutts Jr.'s work crews.

Beneath this layer of stucco,

staff made a major discovery. A thick lime plaster had been applied to the adobe wall. "Lime plaster was used," explains Bill Mennell, State Park's general manager of the project, "because stucco will not stick to adobe."

Chicken wire was attached to the block with wire nails and staples to hold the plaster in place. The exposed adobe, which dates back to at least the Cosmopolitan Hotel era, is in excellent condition. Nobody expected this because non-porous materials like stucco trap moisture causing adobe to melt and eventually crumble.

There are many plausible explanations for the adobe's surprisingly good condition.

First, the lime plaster insulated the adobe from the stucco, allowing it to breathe and wick away moisture.

Second, the way the building was originally designed on an elevated, level cobblestone footing helped minimize ground moisture. "The grade drops quite a bit as it approaches the plaza," says archaeologist Steve Van Wormer, pointing at

a deep trench with the exposed cobblestone footing. "Imagine if you can—at this corner (where Mason and Calhoun streets meet), the foundation was pedestaled up from the street almost four feet to the adobe block."

Third, the veranda that Albert Seeley constructed in 1869 also helped protect the adobe walls from water run-off and rain.

The condition of the adobe raises an interesting question. According to Larry Felton, the project's lead archaeologist, removing the nails may create a "major risk to the long-term conservation of the adobe." Under the circumstance, retaining the stucco may be an acceptable alternative to removing it.

While this treatment may help preserve the historic adobe, it compromises the goal of restoration because the adobe walls were a highly visible, character-defining feature of the Cosmopolitan. They should be visible for people to see. But how to do this without damaging them, and insure ongoing maintenance? This may be the real challenge.

